

1983 ?

The Making of LOUISIANA STORY

Richard Leacock

On Christmas Eve 1945, I joyfully emerged from some three and a half years as a combat film photographer in the U.S. Army Signal Corps. I had spent years filming in and out of combat, sending rolls of film to an unknown destination known as the Department of War and almost never seeing the results, not even knowing whether anything at all was on the film. I felt lost, in the sense that I had no confidence in my capabilities, and found myself facing a world teeming with ex-G.I.s with no jobs. Someone told me that Robert Flaherty was living with his wife Frances at the Chelsea Hotel in New York. I had known the family because I had gone to a school in England which two of their daughters, Franny and Monica, had also attended.

When I was 13 years old (in 1934), I had made a 16 minute film of my father's banana plantation in the Canary Islands (16mm black and white, silent). One of our teachers, Bill Hunter, a geographer cum anthropologist and a movie lover, had involved some of us in making films. Bill showed my film to Flaherty, and he was generous in his praise, saying that someday we would make a film together. Now, ten years later, he told me that he was making a new film, to be shot in the bayou country of Louisiana and invited me to go along. To my amazement he did not ask to see examples of my work, he simply hired me. This struck me at the time as tantamount to

1

irresponsible behavior. I was thrilled.

In retrospect I now understand his attitude, or think I do. Many of the things he did in the months to come seemed "irresponsible." He was like no other director I had met. Why didn't he ask to see my latest work? I think probably he reasoned that I was likable, healthy, strong, diligent and loyal. Why should he worry about my photographic skills? If I couldn't, he could! Unlike other directors, he was, in my view, also the world's greatest cameraman. There was nothing in the world he liked to do more than shoot. Yes, look through the camera lens and shoot. Most directors don't shoot, and most cameramen only shoot when they are paid to. I think back to when Flaherty visited my school: he had a 16mm camera and a tripod, and I recall him spending an entire afternoon filming a blonde, long-haired Irish girl combing her hair, just that, nothing else. At the time I thought he was nuts. I didn't film because something was visually enchanting; I filmed because the film would show you something, instruct, explain. I had no idea how much I had to learn from this extraordinary, powerful, yet gentle man.

In January and February of 1946 we started to assemble equipment to take with us. Again Flaherty rejected the advice of the professional film people. A new 35mm camera, the Arriflex, designed to film the Nazi conquests, was available. These cameras had been liberated from the Wermacht. They were small, light, reflex cameras (you looked through the lens rather than through a viewfinder). We knew these cameras had their problems. The film tended to "breathe" in the gate, and they tended to scratch, but Flaherty loved the

2

reflex aspect and the portability. An engineer in New York modified the gate. Everyone shook their heads: "He's not going to shoot a feature with that contraption? No way!"

He did. He was right.

By late spring we had our kit assembled and paid for: a station wagon with platform roof, two Arriflex cameras, a DeBrie camera as a standby, still cameras, tools, darkroom equipment, a Fairchild disc recorder, a primitive magnetic tape recorder that recorded on coated paper tape, a moviola and other editing equipment, and a 35mm silent projector.

Mr. Flaherty went down by train to arrange for a house to work out of and live in. Frances and I drove down slowly, the wagon groaning under the load. We knew that much of the film would be shot on or around Avery Island or Weeks Island, two salt domes surrounded by marsh land (and oil), so we settled in nearby Abbeville, a charming town.

The whole production crew consisted of Mr. and Mrs. Flaherty, editor Helen Van Dongen, myself, and occasionally Mr. Flaherty's secretary during the early months when he was writing most of the time.

I had never heard of a film being made this way. We took a large house for a year. We built a darkroom and an editing room screened in on the porch, an extra shower bath on the back, cages to keep raccoons, rabbits, deer and skunks in. We built a convivial work bench in the dining area where I could take the cameras apart and clean them (every single night).

During the first months Flaherty spent weeks writing and rewriting the treatment, a surprisingly accurate document in retrospect. We did some early filming of birds, the marshes, etc., but our prime concern was casting. We needed a Cajun trapper, the father, his wife, and an 11 year old son. While Bob wrote, Frances and I set out to find the boy. Perhaps we all had Huck Finn in mind.

How do you find a boy? You visit schools and talk to teachers. We went all over the bayou country, and we shot tests of maybe a dozen boys. They all seemed likable, but when the rushes came back and we screened them, we were amazed. J.C. Boudreaux, perhaps the least likely . . . Poor as a church mouse, barefoot, but he came alive on the screen. He was perfect, and the others were nothing! Nothing at all. I was amazed at this revelation. I hadn't seen the point of filming them--why not just look at them? In J.C.'s screen test, his hair was kind of long, but when I went to get him to bring him to our place, horror! His dad had given him a G.I. haircut. Flaherty was furious. Why didn't you tell them to leave his hair alone, he ranted. Arrangements were made, legal and financial. J.C. and his two cousins moved in with us and, in a way, I became a surrogate father cum barber cum costume man . . .

Now filming began in earnest, and it was totally surprising and very confusing to me. My previous experience as a cameraman led me to believe that I knew what a director should do. In fact, I did know what they should do: they worked from a script which describes the scenes. A location is found, the director tells you

4

During the first months Flaherty spent weeks writing and rewriting the treatment, a surprisingly accurate document in retrospect. We did some early filming of birds, the marshes, etc., but our prime concern was casting. We needed a Cajun trapper, the father, his wife, and an 11 year old son. While Bob wrote, Frances and I set out to find the boy. Perhaps we all had Huck Finn in mind.

How do you find a boy? You visit schools and talk to teachers. We went all over the bayou country, and we shot tests of maybe a dozen boys. They all seemed likable, but when the rushes came back and we screened them, we were amazed. J.C. Boudreaux, perhaps the least likely . . . Poor as a church mouse, barefoot, but he came alive on the screen. He was perfect, and the others were nothing! Nothing at all. I was amazed at this revelation. I hadn't seen the point of filming them--why not just look at them? In J.C.'s screen test, his hair was kind of long, but when I went to get him to bring him to our place, horror! His dad had given him a G.I. haircut. Flaherty was furious. Why didn't you tell them to leave his hair alone, he ranted. Arrangements were made, legal and financial. J.C. and his two cousins moved in with us and, in a way, I became a surrogate father cum barber cum costume man . . .

Now filming began in earnest, and it was totally surprising and very confusing to me. My previous experience as a cameraman led me to believe that I knew what a director should do. In fact, I did know what they should do: they worked from a script which describes the scenes. A location is found, the director tells you

4

where to put the camera and how the camera should move; he then tells the actor(s) what to do, how to move, what to look like. But not Flaherty. We floated around on a raft on the lake at Avery Island, J.C. in his pirogue with his raccoon JoJo, alligators galore, for hours, days, weeks, months. We shot from 6:00 am until 10, then from 2:00 or 3:00 to 6:00 pm. Two cameras were set up, one for me and one for Bob. Everytime an alligator moved, we shot. When it stopped, we stopped. We filmed J.C., alligators, fish, birds, snakes, lotus pads, flowers, trees . . . miles of film, the cameras constantly moving, filming mostly with long "telephoto" lenses.

I particularly remember a day when we were to shoot a specific scene of J.C. finding JoJo, his raccoon, in a tree. The tree was there, JoJo was there, J.C. was there, reflectors were adjusted. I was ready with the camera when Mr. Flaherty found a spider's web bejeweled with drops of dew in perfect light. We spent the whole morning filming the cobweb. This annoyed people; it seemed irresponsible to me. A proper director would have said to the "script girl," "Remind me to get a shot of a spider's web when we have some spare time."

It took me months to realize that Flaherty's attitude was discipline of a meaningful kind. To this day I have never seen such a perfect web, whereas things that can be arranged can always be arranged.

Slowly I began to understand his approach. There were other surprises. Even in Louisiana you have rainy days. These were devoted to screening rushes, not once, not twice, but endlessly.

Over and over. Since I ran the projector, I was always present at these screenings. Bob never tired of looking at the good stuff or the boring stuff that didn't work. That is how he learned: every sequence was a new experience. There were no set ways to film a place, an event, a quality. Nothing would do that did not bear looking at over and over again.

The work days were arduous and long. In summer it was hot. We would be up by 5:00 am. Bob would usually cook breakfast: tea, coffee, beans, eggs, bacon and sausage. Then we would load up and go off to Avery Island or out to the oil rig on a Chris Craft. Back by 6:00, unload the film, develop a test strip (about 1 foot) off the tail of each roll. While they are drying, dismantle and clean the cameras, load film, and then make 8 x 10 blowups of each test strip, examine them. Eleven o'clock and a well-watered Scotch, perhaps a chat with Bob, who would occasionally talk to me about filming.

He spoke mostly about Moana, filmed in Samoa in 1925. And though Moana is not, I think, his most admired film, it appeared that he had worked out his own approach to filming in making the movie. He likened the camera to a horse with blinders on that can only see what is directly in front of it, and while it sees something, it does not see a great deal. The close-up shows a detail but withholds a great deal and thereby generates a desire to see more. The viewer is constantly asking questions: What is going on? What am I looking at?

The sequence of harvesting the coconuts in Moana is an example:

Pea and his older brother Moana arrive at the beach, Moana carrying a long pole, Pea a loop of some kind of cord. Pea approaches the base of a tree and puts the cord loop around his feet whilst Moana sharpens the end of the pole to a point. Pea in close shot starts to climb the tree, jumping the loop in steps upward. The viewer has no idea that this is a tall tree. The obvious way to film a tall tree is to look up at it from the base with a wide angle lens that would give the impression of height by geometry, but Flaherty did just the opposite and went way down the beach using a very long lens so that the tree trunk is merely a slightly tilted line from top to bottom of the frame. Pea hops up and out of frame. The frame moves up, and the process is repeated. Meanwhile, Moana is driving the pole into the soil, pointed end up, more climbing, etc. You never see the top and the bottom of the tree in one shot. The height is achieved by the the time the climb takes rather than by the geometry of the frame. Eventually Pea gets to the coconuts and, smiling and laughing, drops them down. Moana then uses his spiked pole to husk them, and the audience has now solved the little mysteries of this sequence.

I think there is not one shot in Louisiana Story that shows the whole of the oil rig in a single frame. The traditional, or moronic, approach to film is that you start with the long shot which orients the viewer, then you cut to the medium shot, etc. The traditional admonition was that "you must never confuse your audience." Flaherty, however, was a consummate storyteller and a good story never gives you the punch line at the beginning.

7

More difficult for me to explain is Flaherty's way of looking at things. We were constantly panning, tilting, moving the camera, searching. There is rhythm in the filming, rhythm in the captured movements and compositions that are completely at odds with the compositions that work in static imagery. I once went through Louisiana Story looking for stills that could illustrate what I am talking about and found very, very few good stills. What is there is pure film magic constantly in motion.

One of the most difficult sequences was supposed to show how oil companies go about discovering oil, an almost educational sequence on seismology. We started filming a seismograph crew in the marsh grass exploding charges of dynamite and recording the echoes from down under on graph paper rolls. We did everything we could think of but the results were dismally dull. So then we took a different tack. Instead of explaining, just see it as a mystery through the boy's eyes: he is out hunting and gets glimpses of a huge marsh-buggy (again, pedestrian if you see it all). He sees and hears explosions only through the grass that surrounds him. The explosions are followed by fabulous shots of clouds of birds wheeling in the sky that we shot for no other reason than that they were beautiful, but that elevated this sequence from good to super, in my view.

Similarly, a single shot that I got of an alligator killing a bird transformed all the other shots of alligators--it made the punch line.

A major part of Louisiana Story is the drilling of the oil

well. We spent weeks and weeks filming the drilling crew at work on the rig and as far as I was concerned, it was fine. There was certainly nothing wrong with it, so I was stunned when, after days of looking at the footage, in full knowledge that time was running out for us, that money was about gone, Mr. Flaherty told me that we were going to reshoot all the drilling at night!

Madness!

"No," he said, "when I see them working at night there is magic and what we have does not have magic, we see too much, the grime, the odd tools left lying around . . ." or words to that effect. So I spent a couple of days running wires up the rig and clamping cheap reflector spots here, there, and everywhere, and we did it over. Flaherty was so right that it was easy. It looked fabulous.

To work his way takes a heavy toll. Granted, he had a working treatment that is close to the resulting film, but to achieve the film took miracles. The script spoke of the well blowing out. I would bring this somewhat thorny subject up from time to time, and eventually arrangements were made to bring high pressure pumps from Houston. The results were pathetic, so I decided not to bring it up anymore. Our first child, Elspeth, was born in New York, and I went to greet her. While I was gone, a similar well nearby did blow out and Flaherty and Sydney Smith, who had been assisting us, went and were told that no electric motor was to come anywhere near the rig. So they took the old French DeBrie camera and hand cranked it. Spectacular!

9

But this dependence on big and little miracles in the face of such high stakes took its toll. Insomnia, depression, the possibility of not succeeding haunted Flaherty. It was he who took the burden, who had the integrity never to settle for less--but he also had enormous support from Frances, creative support. She was always there, shot stills and worked every bit as hard as he. And behind her was the tiny army, editor Helen Van Dongen, myself, Sydney Smith, sound recordist Benjy Donneger, and Lennie Starck, the latter two of whom had come down toward the end to work on the sound sequences. We labored mightily for 14 months in Louisiana, guided and loved by one of the most remarkable men in the history of the cinema, Robert J. Flaherty.

RL/clb
11/83